

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 18 NEW REPUBLIC
5 August 1985

How the CIA masterminds the Nicaraguan insurgency.

CONFESIONS OF A 'CONTRA'

BY EDGAR CHAMORRO WITH JEFFERSON MORLEY

Miami

ON DECEMBER 7, 1982, I met with five Nicaraguans and two Americans in an executive suite at the Four Ambassadors Hotel in downtown Miami to rehearse for a press conference we would be holding the next day. The Nicaraguans were prominent (and in my case not so prominent) opponents of the Somoza and Sandinista regimes who were to be introduced as directors of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), that is, the *contras*. The Americans were CIA agents. The one in charge, known to us as Tony Feldman, was accompanied by Thomas Castillo, one of his several assistants. They wanted to make sure we said the right things in our first joint public appearance.

Feldman introduced two lawyers from Washington who briefed us on the Neutrality Act, the American law prohibiting private citizens from waging war on another country

Edgar Chamorro served as a director of the anti-Sandinista rebel organization, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, from 1982 to 1984. He now lives in Key Biscayne, Florida.

from U.S. territory. Feldman was worried we were going to tell the press that we were trying to overthrow the Sandinistas, which, of course, is exactly what we wanted to do. He emphasized that we should say instead that we were trying to "create conditions for democracy." After the briefing we asked each other the questions we were likely to face in the morning.

"Where have you been getting money?" someone asked.

"Say your sources want to remain confidential," Feldman advised—a truthful and very clever answer.

"Have you had any contact with U.S. government officials?"

The CIA men agreed there was no way to finesse this one. We simply had to lie and say, "No." We practiced like this for three hours.

The press conference, held in Fort Lauderdale to avoid the risk of demonstrations in Miami, was all very solemn and pompous. We filed into the Hilton Conference Center one at a time, as if we were a government taking power;

STAT

CONTINUED

the only thing missing was the music. Then I read our statement of principles and goals.

"We the Directorate of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force," I declared, "commit ourselves to guide and support this effort of the Nicaraguan people to salvage our sacred patriotic honor, offering for this purpose all-out industry, dedication, and if necessary, our very lives." I felt some remorse reciting these words. Our original text had made no such offer, but the CIA men had thrown that version out. A young man named George (I never learned his last name) had been called in from Washington to rewrite our statement, and it was he who bravely offered up our lives.

The seven of us who later took questions from reporters had never worked together. Previously, the *contras* had been primarily a military movement, led by former Somoza National Guardsmen, that skirmished with the Sandinista army on the Nicaraguan-Honduran border. These forces were trained and advised by Argentine military officers. We civilians had been active in anti-Sandinista activities in the U.S., but had no formal connection to the military commanders. The CIA had brought the groups together with money and unequivocal promises of support.

I hadn't even met Enrique Bermudez, the former National Guardsman who commanded the *contra* troops in Honduras, until the rehearsal the day before. Alfonso Callejas, a former vice president of Nicaragua who broke with Somoza in 1972 and who lived in Texas, had only arrived that morning. He came to the press conference straight from the airport. We told him, "You weren't at the rehearsal, so don't say anything." He spoke anyway, but we managed to keep his answers short, and he didn't do much damage.

There were some unavoidable contradictions in our answers. On the one hand, we were careful to say that we had great admiration for, but no formal connection with, the freedom fighters battling the Sandinista army on the Honduran border. On the other hand, we claimed that the directorate would put the *contra* forces under civilian control. But overall we thought we made a good impression, and when I met Thomas Castillo again that night, he said he was pleased. We returned to Miami, and I began my two years as a *contra*.

ICAME TO Nicaraguan politics late, especially considering my background. After Somoza, my family name is perhaps the best known in Nicaragua; four Chamorros served as president of Nicaragua in the 19th and early 20th centuries. My family led the Conservative Party, for decades the major opposition to Somoza's Liberal Party. My father, like many of my relatives, was persecuted and jailed several times by Somoza. I, however, preferred education to politics, joining the Jesuits in 1950 at age 19. I went on to become a priest and a teacher, studying at different times at the Catholic University in Ecuador, at St. Louis University, and at Marquette, and later becoming a full professor and dean of the School of Humanities at the University of Central America. Even after leaving the

2

priesthood in 1969, I continued studying, earning a master's degree from Harvard University in 1972.

For me the Sandinista revolution began with the earthquake that devastated Managua in 1972. We learned that large buildings, thought to be indestructible, could become rubble in minutes. Still, I was not very involved in politics. In Managua I founded my own advertising agency, Creative Publicity, and handled accounts for businesses owned by people in my family, including the local General Motors and Toyota dealers, and Toña, Nicaragua's most popular beer. My only political venture was to accept a one-year appointment in 1977 to the Nicaraguan Mission to the United Nations. (Under Somoza, members of the opposition Conservative Party, to which I nominally belonged, were given non-essential government posts.) The most political thing I did there was secretly pass a message from Sandinista friends to U.S. Ambassador Andrew Young in October 1977 asking him to denounce Somoza. He never did.

As the insurrection against Somoza grew in 1978, I helped out in other small ways. When my close friend Sergio Ramirez, now Daniel Ortega's vice president, was being hunted by the National Guard, I hid him in my children's bedroom. But in 1979 the growing chaos in Managua made me fear for my family's safety. Somoza's planes were bombing the barrios near my house and desperate National Guardsmen were shooting innocent people on the street. On June 17, a month before Somoza was overthrown, my wife and I and our two children came to Miami.

I returned in September 1979 to see if things had calmed down enough for us to return. I traveled to the south to visit an uncle and to attend a ceremony in which the Sandinista national leadership turned over power to local authorities. Many of the leaders of the revolution were there: Daniel Ortega, Ramirez, Violeta Chamorro, the widow of my distant cousin Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, the anti-Somoza editor of *La Prensa* who was assassinated in 1978. Talking with people at the big picnic held after the ceremony, I could see that Castro was in control of the revolution—not as a manipulator but as the only available role model. Even the less fanatic people like Violeta were outspoken that day. "On to El Salvador!" she cried. I didn't want to oppose them. I believed the spirit behind the revolution was authentic and true. But I knew if I joined them my life would be in the hands of the culture of the revolution. I wished them well. Perhaps if I had been younger and single, I would have joined their cause.

BACK IN MIAMI, I continued meeting informally every two weeks or so with other Nicaraguan exiles. Most of them, like me, were from the Conservative Party, and favored social change without going so far as the revolutionary transformation favored by the Sandinistas.

Our group became more formal in late 1980 when Francisco Cardenal, an engineer who had been a high-ranking Sandinista, left Nicaragua and joined us in Miami. We

Continued

named ourselves the *Union Democratica Nicaraguense*, but we limited ourselves to activities such as writing letters to members of Congress urging them to cut off aid to the Sandinistas. By this time Cardenal was receiving money from the CIA. He often traveled to Washington to meet with people from the Agency and the State Department, and to Honduras to establish contact with the former National Guardsmen.

AS THE SANDINISTAS grew more repressive in 1980, many of us became convinced that they had to be replaced, and that only armed opposition could do it. The Sandinistas had gone too far in imitating Cuba, in chanting slogans that had no bearing on the situation in Nicaragua. Finally, the assassination of Jorge Salazar in November 1980 made it clear that the Sandinistas would not tolerate any serious political opposition. Salazar had been a popular spokesman and a brave leader, organizing coffee and cattle producers into independent cooperatives. We had not wanted to believe they would be so dictatorial as to kill him.

In August 1981 our group sent a representative to an important meeting in Guatemala with U.S. officials, the National Guardsmen, and their Argentine military advisers. Did we want to merge our efforts? The question sparked long debates in the exile community in Miami. I remember arguing long into the night that we should accept this alliance. I said—mistakenly, it turned out—that the Somoza National Guardsmen were professional soldiers and not necessarily bad guys. Besides, I pointed out, we didn't have the capacity to train a fighting force, and we had to work with people who did. The others responded by telling stories of being unfairly arrested, beaten, or robbed by the National Guard. They insisted that anyone associated with the National Guard had done so much damage to Nicaragua that we should never, never work with them. Despite these objections, we joined our efforts with those of the *contras* in Honduras.

Cardenal, along with another civilian and Enrique Bermudez, became the directorate of the *contras*. Cardenal immediately clashed with the military commanders. He was very nationalistic, very strong-minded, and he had a tremendous dislike for the National Guard. He expected civilians to be in charge, and he prematurely tried to control the military leadership. For his efforts, he was expelled from Honduras by Bermudez in September 1982.

Plotting against the Sandinistas was not a full-time job for me. In November 1982 I was working as a commodities broker for Cargill when I received a totally unexpected phone call from an American who called himself Steve Davis. "I am speaking in the name of the government of the United States," he said in a voice accustomed to giving orders. He asked to see me that day. Over lunch at a restaurant near my house in Key Biscayne, Davis told me that Cardenal had been fighting too much with National Guardsmen, and that the United States wanted to increase the size of the *contras'* political leadership.

I told him that I favored creating something like a *contra*

3

congress, composed of perhaps 21 leading Nicaraguans. This would have several advantages, I explained. First, it could create more debate, allow more participation by civilians, and possibly open avenues to the Sandinistas. Second, it could include representatives from the other rebel groups such as the one led by former Sandinista hero Eden Pastora, who shunned any contact with National Guardsmen. Third, one military commander could not defy or challenge 20 other important people. Fourth, and most important, I wanted to establish the supremacy of laws, not leaders, within the Nicaraguan opposition. I wanted to have a written constitution and formal procedures that would prevent us from succumbing to the perennial Latin American weakness for the caudillo.

Davis liked my proposal. But even at this first meeting I noticed a distinctive trait of CIA agents: they immediately reinforce what you have to say. "Well, yes," they respond, "we completely agree." Davis knew my views, and knew he had to sound liberal. "We don't want anybody in the directorate who is Somocista, who has robbed money from Nicaragua, who has committed crimes," he claimed. He was overdoing it.

As Davis said good-bye, he told me that I wouldn't always see him, that sometimes others would call or visit me on his behalf. And in the days that followed other men did come. Their activities were somewhat mysterious. All of them were getting ready for the arrival of someone from Washington who wanted me to be a part of something and to share in the administration's plans with respect to Nicaragua.

FINALLY, in late November 1982, Davis asked me to have dinner in his suite at the Holiday Inn in downtown Miami. There I met the man who came from Washington—Tony Feldman. He was about 40 years old, alert and good-looking. He had thinning hair, a long face, an easy smile, and a gentleman's manner. He would have made a superb car salesman. He asked me to serve on a seven-member directorate of the FDN (anything larger would be unmanageable, they had decided). He promised this directorate would have the full backing of the United States government and that we would march into Managua by July 1983. When I said that struck me as very little time, he conceded that the victory might take until the end of the year.

I was glad to see that the Americans were committed enough to our cause to be taking such an active role, and I was flattered as well. I said yes. Over the next several days Feldman took control of the operation and moved the headquarters two blocks down to the less fancy Four Ambassadors, where we met constantly. The men from Washington wanted at all costs to have a woman on the directorate. What did I think of Lucia Salazar, Jorge Salazar's widow? I agreed that appointing her would be a good idea. They ran down the general qualities required for all the directors: must have been anti-Somocista; must have a reputation for honesty and not too much fondness for money; must be willing to move to Honduras and devote

Continued

all their time to politics. They suggested names quickly, as if spontaneously. But I sensed that they had already decided whom they wanted. It was clear they didn't want Cardenal because he didn't get along with Bermudez. When Cardenal was not named to the new directorate, he quit politics altogether. He now sells life insurance in Miami.

Along the way my friends and I tried to raise the substantive issues that had concerned us all along. Knowing that Bermudez had forced Cardenal out of Honduras, we wanted assurances that we civilians would have authority over the military officers. Feldman and his assistants told me they wanted to dilute Bermudez's power with a larger directorate, to kick him upstairs. I also wanted Nicaraguans to approve the budget and control the money. Feldman agreed to this in principle, but said we would work out the details later. I also asked for a clear definition of what our goals were and what the Americans' goals were. This I never received.

We didn't discuss these things in great detail. The most important thing Feldman said repeatedly was that the CIA had to put together a group of Nicaraguans—non-Somocistas—before Congress voted on the Boland Amendment prohibiting U.S. aid to forces fighting to overthrow the Sandinistas. He emphasized that we had to go public quickly in order to get Congress to ease its position.

So we moved on to cosmetic issues. Some other Nicaraguan exiles working with me wrote the statement for the press conference. It was mostly about the right to private property, and it was very anticommunist. Thomas Castillo was sitting at the conference table in the suite at the Four Ambassadors when he read it. "Shit, who wrote this?" he said, shaking his head. "It sounds like all you want is to get back what you lost. You have to write something more progressive, more political. We'll get someone from Washington to help you." That's when George was called in. My friends who worked with him told me later that he insisted they rewrite everything to make it more socialist. The Americans, I began to realize, liked to make all the crucial decisions.

MY DOUBTS, though, were still relatively minor. I was convinced the Sandinistas had to be thrown out. All along I had said we had to see how serious the Americans were about helping us, and the only way to do that was to play by their rules. So I quit my job at Cargill and devoted myself full-time to the FDN. The CIA promised me a salary of \$2,000 a month plus expenses and I was put in charge of public relations.

We wanted to set up highly visible headquarters in a shopping center or office building, but the CIA didn't like the idea. They said it would become a target for demonstrations or violence. They insisted that we take an elegant suite at the David Williams Hotel in Coral Gables, which they paid for. The directors met there to draw up work plans. The CIA men sat by, with their yellow legal pads, writing down whatever we said we needed.

The FDN's first public relations coup was not my doing.

It originated, I think, with Feldman's superiors in Washington. The idea was to put out a 12-point peace initiative—a move I thought was premature given the fact that we had launched our war initiative only a month before. But on January 13, 1983, we released the initiative, which essentially demanded the surrender of the Sandinista government. I asked why we were doing all this.

"This is 90 percent propaganda," Castillo explained. He suggested I write a letter to the Socialist International asking to be invited to explain the initiative at its upcoming annual meeting. "There's no way they will invite you, but it will give the FDN lots of publicity. It'll be news." So I signed the letters to the Socialist International.

In March 1983, while Bermudez and I were in Honduras, the other five directors spent a month presenting the case for the *contras* to politicians and reporters in Europe. Adolfo Calero, a former Coca-Cola distributor in Managua and increasingly the most powerful civilian on the directorate, and Indalecio Rodriguez, a former rector of the University of Central America, did a good job of winning support in Germany and Spain.

Unfortunately the other three directors mostly enjoyed the \$5,000 in expense money that the CIA had given each of them. Lucia Salazar, Alfonso Callejas, and Marco Zeledon, a prominent Nicaraguan businessman, sometimes treated the trip as a free vacation, courtesy of the American taxpayer. Zeledon, Salazar, and Callejas missed their planes and appointments. The CIA man began to suspect hanky-panky. "Is Zeledon screwing Lucia?" one of them asked me one day after their return. "I don't know if he's screwing her," I told him, "but he's screwing you."

I MOVED TO Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, to run the *contras'* public relations office. With CIA money I hired several writers, reporters, and technicians to prepare a monthly bulletin called "Comandos," to run our radio station, and to write press releases. My friend George had been made deputy to the CIA station chief in Tegucigalpa, and he worked with me in our headquarters in a safe house.

Bermudez stayed in Honduras to command the *contra* troops, and Indalecio Rodriguez stayed to work with refugees fleeing Nicaragua. The other four directors worked out of Miami or Washington, mainly to lobby Congress. I sat in on meetings where the CIA men advised them how to win votes for continued CIA funding. The CIA men didn't have much respect for Congress. They said we could change how representatives voted as long as we knew how to "sell" our case and place them in a position of looking soft on communism. They suggested members whom we should lobby and gave us the names of big shots we should contact in their home districts.

I continued to press for some clear definition of what we were hoping to achieve and how specifically we were going to achieve it. Once we arrived in Honduras, Feldman's promise that we would be in Managua before the end of the year seemed to recede. The CIA station chief in Tegucigalpa spoke only of holding territory in the Isabela

Continued

mountain range, and pestering the Sandinista army so as to weaken it. I knew the CIA was talking with other anti-Sandinista groups in Miami and Central America, but they never put us together. And I don't think it was just political differences among the groups that blocked unification. If Bermudez and other National Guardsmen were the obstacle, the CIA could get rid of them. But I realized the CIA wanted to keep us apart. That way they didn't have to commit themselves to anyone. They were using us for their own purposes. Whatever their bigger plan was—defending the Monroe Doctrine or practicing "containment" or whatever—they were hiding it from us.

I SLOWLY got a sense of what the CIA's plans did not include as I attempted to improve the *contras'* image. Especially in my first year, it was standard *contra* practice to kill Sandinista prisoners and collaborators. In talking with officers in the *contra* camps along the Honduran borders, I frequently heard offhand remarks like, "Oh, I cut his throat." It was like stomping on a cockroach to them. So I admitted to the press that there had been executions. I said that they were not part of our policy, and that we had to train our men better. The CIA and Bermudez didn't like my candor, but in the long run it won credibility with the press, and I believe it had a positive influence in the conduct of the war.

I also established a program of political education for the soldiers. I printed up a little manual called the *Blue and White Book* that talked about the meaning of democracy, social justice, and so on. The soldiers could carry it with them at all times and educate themselves about what they were fighting for. The military commanders liked it but never understood the importance of it. I doubt if Bermudez ever read it.

The political dimension of the struggle meant nothing to the commanders. They all had the simplistic belief that Somoza lost because he had his hands tied by Jimmy Carter and that if he hadn't he could have killed a lot of people and won. The Argentine officers who trained them had told them, "We're the only people in Latin America who've beaten the communists in a war. The way to win is to fight a 'dirty war' like we did in the 1970s." I became convinced that the combination of Argentine training and National Guard mentality was one of the major obstacles to putting the *contra* movement on a truly democratic path.

Bermudez's best friend was Ricardo "Chino" Lau, who was one of the most notorious and brutal National Guardsmen under Somoza. Even months after Calero announced that Lau had resigned from the FDN, Lau was still the last person to talk to Bermudez at night and the first person to talk to him in the morning. Bermudez was even feared by his own officers. At one meeting of the directorate three of our top intelligence officers said they each suspected that Bermudez and Lau were plotting to kill them, and they asked us what we were going to do. There was nothing we could do. Bermudez, of course, denied it. But Bermudez demanded total loyalty and in-

timidated physically those who didn't provide it. Along with Calero and Calero's top aide, a civilian Somocista named Aristides Sanchez, Bermudez was unchallengeable. Privately, we referred to this threesome as the "Bermudez triangle."

Needless to say, the civilian directors of the *contras* did not gain control of the military. Despite Feldman's promise, we didn't even get complete control of the budget. It took six months just to get a Nicaraguan keeping the books. (One of the Argentines had been doing them up till then.) And even then we could only approve the budgets for troop supplies, for logistical goods such as gasoline and rented trucks, and for political efforts. We were never given the right to decide either how much we would spend on weapons or what kinds of weapons we wanted. I'm not sure the CIA even let Bermudez in on those decisions. And the civilians never had any say in military strategy. There was simply no mechanism for consultation. When I tried to raise the matter of civilian control with the CIA people, I was politely brushed aside. Their attitude was we were at the war stage of the struggle. Politics would come later.

The only time all seven *contra* directors came to Honduras was whenever Dewey Maroni, the chief of the project for the CIA, flew in. We first met with Maroni at one of our safe houses in Tegucigalpa in July 1983. He was a powerfully built man with a barrel chest and a Bronx accent. He smoked cigars and spoke with authority. As he sat among us, he reminded me of a proconsul come to tell his subjects what to do and how to do it. I have never witnessed such arrogance while working with a foreigner.

During his next visit in October 1983, Maroni proposed appointing a chairman of the directorate, an idea I favored. He started saying that this chairman should be able to work in Washington, not be Somocista, be known in Washington, and so on. It became obvious he was describing Calero. Calero was a politician who worked 16 hours a day and regarded the CIA as his constituency. We directors went into another room to vote. It was as easy as picking the color of Napoleon's white horse. When we came back in the room, Maroni shook Calero's hand. "Congratulations, Mr. President," he said. We had elected a chairman, and Maroni, in an unusual demonstration of the popular will, had immediately promoted him to president.

AT 2 A.M. on January 5, 1984, George woke me up at my safe house in Tegucigalpa and handed me a press release in excellent Spanish. I was surprised to read that we—the *contras*—were taking credit for having mined several Nicaraguan harbors. George told me to rush to our clandestine radio station and read this announcement before the Sandinistas broke the news. Of course, we played no role in the mining of the harbors. This was not unusual. The CIA often gave us credit (or perhaps blame) for operations that we knew nothing about. The CIA employed its team of "Latino assets" to bomb the Sandinistas' petroleum tanks at Punto Corinto in October 1983. When I

Continued

protested to George, asking why the CIA didn't simply give us the money and let patriotic Nicaraguans do the job, he sighed, "This is the way they want us to do it in Washington."

Meanwhile our own operations were getting inadequate support. We had doubled the number of volunteers in our forces from 3,500 to 7,000 in 1983. But we had too few machine guns and airplanes, and too little logistical support when we operated inside Nicaraguan territory. Finally, in the summer we received two C-47 planes that the CIA had been promising for months. They had poor avionics and poor defense systems. They were practically flying coffins. I remember meeting with the CIA people at the Marriott Hotel in Rosslyn, Virginia, around this time. One director told me the CIA had prepared a "nice treat" for his visit to Washington: a tour of museums and restaurants. I said, "Don't forget to go to the Smithsonian, where you'll see a C-47 as old as the one that these gentlemen will give us someday."

I got the feeling the CIA didn't want to let us win. I thought we should try to capture a town, but the CIA said it was impossible. In a way they were right. People in Nicaragua still half believed that the Sandinistas were getting better. They weren't ready for another change. Our troops took the town of Ocotal once for a few hours, but the people didn't rejoice to see us. They just said, "Good, you killed that brutal Sandinista guy." They didn't speak out for the FDN, and our soldiers didn't know how to talk to them. This was the price we paid for not emphasizing democratic goals and not working as a constitutional movement. The Americans wanted an army they could control. They didn't want to risk an insurrection that was not under their control.

MY POSITION in the FDN was getting more precarious. The chain of events that ultimately led me to leave began around this time. In the fall of 1983 a CIA man known as John Kirkpatrick arrived in Honduras. Kirkpatrick was a character out of a Graham Greene novel. He was very critical of the top brass of the FDN and loved the lowest and poorest soldiers. He drank too much and cried all the time. He was excited by my political education work with our troops, and wanted to prepare a psychological warfare manual as well.

We worked a few hours a day for a week or two, then Kirkpatrick finished the manuscript with my secretary. When the manual came back from the printer, I discovered two passages that I thought were immoral and dangerous. One recommended hiring professional criminals. The other advocated killing our fellow *contras* to create martyrs for the cause. I didn't particularly want to be martyred by the CIA in its struggle against international communism. Besides, the assassination of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro and the terrible consequences of changing the destiny of a nation through political killing was fresh in my memory. I locked up all the copies of the manual and hired two youths to cut out the offending pages and glue in expurgated pages. I thought that was the end of the matter.

I saw Dewey Maroni for the last time on June 14, 1984, and found his views had changed. A year before he had praised Eden Pastora for his ability to inspire the peasantry. Now he said he had given up on Pastora, and he addressed himself fondly to Bermudez: "Well done, Colonel. Keep it up. Your boys are doing fine." I realized that it was all over for those of us who wanted to make the *contras* a democratic political movement. Shortly after that Calero told me I could no longer work in Honduras. I returned to Miami to work with the local FDN committee, but I learned that Calero had told FDN people not to invite me to any FDN functions.

In October 1984 a *New York Times* reporter obtained a copy of the original version of the psychological warfare manual, and the CIA and the Reagan administration were embarrassed by repugnant passages. Calero immediately concluded that I had told the *Times* about it (I hadn't) in order to defeat Reagan in the presidential election. We met one last time in Miami a week after the election. He called me a traitor and I called him a dictator. On November 20, 1984, I received a letter saying that the FDN directo^rate had unanimously agreed to relieve me of my duties.

INOW BELIEVE that a political dialogue in Nicaragua should be the United States's top priority. We have tried military pressure, and it hasn't worked. It hasn't created the conditions for democracy and it hasn't forced the Sandinistas to negotiate. The first step toward national reconciliation must be abolition of the *contra* army. By urging the rebels to lay down their guns, the United States would strengthen the moderates and weaken the extremists on both sides. President Reagan should also lower his inflammatory rhetoric and give more than lip service to the Contadora peace initiative sponsored by Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, and Panama. Contadora still offers the best chance for achieving a lasting political solution.

When I joined the *contras* in December 1982, I thought the United States and the CIA wanted to restore the promise of the Sandinista revolution. Now I think they are very pro-counterrevolution. The idealistic young people who actually fought against the Sandinista army have real grievances. Their land has been confiscated or they have been persecuted for their religious views or they have resisted the Sandinista draft. But they are being used as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy by the CIA and the Reagan administration. And they are being used by the National Guardsmen and Somocista politicians who simply want to go back to Nicaragua to get back the money and the power they lost in 1979. If the *contras* ever took power, they would simply replace the communists with a law-and-order regime and no one would be any better off. What's more, many of the civilian *contra* leaders have children in their teens or 20s, and yet they do not send them to fight the war they favor so much. They expect the *campesinos* to continue to die while they live in Miami and wait for their dream to come true. I am now convinced that the *contra* cause for which I gave up two years of my life offers Nicaragua nothing but a return to the past. □